

COUNTERMAPPING THE UNIVERSITY

Queen Mary Countermapping Collective - Queen Mary, University of London

Responses to ideological and financial attacks on higher education have been widespread. Students, faculty, and staff have mobilized around the world, not simply to reverse cuts in funding but to rethink along new lines the means and ends of education. For the past half-century, higher education held a privileged place in a larger social compact that promised upward mobility through expanded access to professional credentials. Foreclosing this portal has stood as a cancellation of the future as it was once understood by much of the working and middle class. The message to those who are not already the beneficiaries of increasingly stratified vectors of opportunity is that there is no place for them in the enchanted land once reachable by vessels propelled by winds known as equality and progress.

In distinction to this narrowing optic, the demonstrations and mobilizations responding to recent attacks seek to stir up their own storms of protest. They chart their own course for what the future might be. Due in large part to the expansion of higher education over the past half-century, the university, once the preserve of specialized knowledge that does no more than be for itself, has become a site where activists of various stripes pose the question of what and who education is for. These critical interrogations reflect not simply on the aims of higher education, but on its means as well. They reassemble shards of ruptured disciplinary authority, protocols of expertise that have gone out of service, methods and forms taken up with new feelings, tone, and consequences. The resulting mobilizations share with cultural studies the goal of expanding the techniques, objects, and aims of what is worth knowing. They realign the affinities and affiliations by which critical engagement moves in the world.

It is in this spirit that we share in this research thread some exemplary work by an interdisciplinary and geographically-dispersed collective that sought a concrete response to the baleful changes visited upon their campus and its social surroundings. Appropriating the genre of the campus map, graduate students at Queen Mary University London and University of North Carolina Chapel Hill have produced a countermap of the university. Elegant in design, yet multi-purposed, their mapping of alternative uses and critiques takes the form of a poster-sized doubled sided print which locates the university within its larger societal force field (the map's front side), and stages an arena for playing that field by means of a board game (which appears on the reverse side). In sharp contrast to the political geography of curricula intended to assimilate students to an already settled matter and progress-toward-a-degree, an unproblematic temporal beat measured by accumulated credit-hours, the critical cartographical work of this collective reallocates the energies of their seminars and research to produce alternate forms of knowledge and means for its legitimation.

At once serious and playful, the work of this counter-mapping opens a range of political and pedagogical timbres through which the apparent fixity of the present is rendered fungible and the tone of response multiple. A variety of futures and possible courses of action can be imagined and explored in the present, both inside and outside of the classroom. At once strategic and tactical, practical and conceptual, focused and elastic, the composite map and game provide a political technology by which the boundaries that define the present limits of the possible might be redrawn. Both the artifact and the interview below invite response across a wide array of media, including related contributions to this thread of Lateral. As co-editors of the thread, we hope that you will join this conversation and mobilization. Please do contact us with your commentaries and interventions. Our hope is that this example can be set in relation to others that are being devised in the midst of this vital contestation.

Bruce Burgett, University of Washington Bothell
 Randy Martin, New York University



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Interview with the Queen Mary Countermapping Collective

Manuela Zechner - Tim Stallmann - Maria Catalina Bejarano Soto - Liz Mason-Deese
Rakhee Kewada - Bue Rübner Hansen - Mara Ferreri - Camille Barbagallo



What was the process you undertook to create the map?

For some of us the process started with a reflection on the question of 'what is the university?' during a PhD seminar. Taking this question and thinking through the materiality of how we inhabit the university, we found ourselves in our first years of yet another degree in yet another institution, tired of what the neo-liberal university makes us be and do and urgently desiring a collective place and practice within it. We dodged PhD writing and seminar coursework by proposing a collective process of making a countermap. From the outset we hoped that the process would allow us to engage with the university in a more collective, inspiring and transformative way.

For others of us the process started through an encounter with the practice of countermapping and the Counter Cartographies Collective (3C's); an encounter that resonated with us affectively and intellectually, seeming to point to a potential modality of engaging with the university.

Once we had set up the parameters and secured funding for a collaborative process between our group at Queen Mary and the 3Cs, we began to undertake extensive preparation. This involved two months of gathering data, reflecting and discussing: between ourselves, with staff and students from Queen Mary, through the medium of a questionnaire, statistics and our experiences. Out of this grew an extensive archive, out of which we began to develop the map and a collective working space.

May 2010 saw us move this preparation into the second phase, beginning the map design and inviting other people to participate in making and producing it, via an open call for collaborators and participants. We spent intensive weeks working together in London, setting up our headquarters in the business school where many of us were based, and organised three open events in order to engage different groups of people.

We began with a reflection on the imaginaries of the university, followed by a collective drift around Queen Mary Mile End campus. Second, we held a workshop on how to make a counter-map using open source software. Finally, we held a discussion with different collectives and people in and around the university about how counter-mapping can be of use to education movements and groups, as a research method as well as organizing tool.

These events brought many new discussions, lines of investigation and people to our process, leading to further intensive working periods in May and September. Without being fully aware of it, we were surfing on an early buzz of 'mapping' in the city. At the same time, the British Library hosted an exhibition of maps which was very useful to our research and aesthetics, and there seemed to be significant interest in processes of counter-mapping.

Where did the idea come from, what are the politics of mapping you'd like to advance?

To begin with, it's a countermap, not a traditional map. One side presents the countermap and the other is a 'game'. The Counter Cartographies Collective's practice and politics provided a good background and content and together we all brought our various experiences of mapping, making relational tools and organising. The disorientation map they made of the University of North Carolina inspired us to further think about mapping as a research methodology; specifically as a form of understanding complex flows and blockages and as a way of visualising them and politicising them in the process.

It is a countermap not simply because it sits in opposition to existing maps of Queen Mary, the British university system, migratory flows or of fortress Europe, but also because it's a process of creating counter-knowledges and perspectives. The process of producing the map is itself a reflection on the knowledge produced through mapping, its accessibility and possible uses, as well as on the tools through which these knowledges are produced and disseminated (open source and free data), and the ways it is disseminated (creative commons).

It is also a countermap because of our own position in making it. The game itself is a countermap in the sense that it counters the idea of a map as a bird's eye view of complex dynamics. The game makes sense only if you play it, and playing it means to virtually partake in the frustrations of the filter mechanisms of universities and the nation state, their arbitrariness (the flip of a coin determines where you move; both money and chance), their fundamental unfairness, but also to look for alternatives, shortcuts, ways out and ways in.

How did the project itself help cohere the collective?

This long and sustained process lasting from February till September, with its different intensities and configurations of research and work, allowed both the project and the collective to grow in a rich and complex way. Having a regular rhythm of meetings and a headquarter space meant that people could fully focus on the project. The everyday experience of sharing food, figuring out working patterns and having much informal socialising time through which the project also came to be

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reflected on - collectively dealing with desires, pleasures and limitations - were important for the becoming of the collective. This was particularly important because we were trying to invent a space for research, analysis, politics and collective collaboration that we hoped to be able to carry beyond the project in some way.

The enthusiastic reception the countermap and game received in different universities, groups and networks was very encouraging and happened to feed directly into recent mobilizations around education struggles in the UK. This has made the countermap not just a useful tool for teaching and organising, but one that circulates in a space that has come to be not just that of individual institutions and projects, but also that of a 'movement'.

How does this transform understandings of organizing and interdisciplinarity?

We started with questions, not answers, and we used all tools we had at our disposal, coming from many different disciplines and backgrounds. Interdisciplinarity may not be the best concept to describe the process since none of us are actually 'within' a discipline in our own research, nor in our education path. As such, the working process was the coming together of a group of people with different trajectories of inter- and transdisciplinarity. We came together not as a group of people wanting to state something determinate or to prove a certain point. Rather we formed as a group around a set of shared questions and the desire to make a countermap. This has made the process open and practical.

Our research and analysis has not been influenced solely by notions of academic disciplines. We were not trying to fulfil certain expectations and criteria of so-called 'neutrality' and 'objectivity'. Instead, it has been a practical process in which our mode of working has been formed dialogically by the group and the problems at hand, rather than in reference to tradition or authority.

With all our diverging experiences of the university and the different ways in which studying seems to engender discipline and self-discipline, it was clear that the university was not some object outside us which we could study from a neutral perspective. The complexity of our often diverging experiences of the university, and all of us being within, outside and beyond the university at once, is a complexity which cannot be divorced from what the university is as an institution; a site of labour and study, a filter and a border. For us it is a space which is not a coherent neat structure or objective set of relations, but a strategic field, with certain problems and contradictions running through it. With our map and game we tried to make an intervention into this space and to organise around these problems. As a group this really helped us cohere and create our own space. Not organising around some foreign banner such as an academic discipline, or someone else's problems, we were able to find our own legs. There is no doubt this had been a reason why this process has been affectively, intellectually and politically much more satisfying and inspiring than regular group exercises or 'learning experiences'.

How do questions of tone / voice / look / humour / outrage / critique get designed in?

We all started with different understandings and ideas, so the process of visualising and writing was one of collective design involving discussion, debate and continuous feedback. Small working groups fed back to the main group every couple of hours or at the end of the day. Everyone participated in the visual research and design, with all visual and textual material checked, argued about and edited collectively.

Our different histories and approaches to design, critique and affectivity generated many discussions that allowed us to find ways of building the map and game on multiple layers and registers. The resulting design may be bumpy in some places, but the fact that contrasting aesthetics and approaches are present in it makes it more interesting for us than a smooth one-dimensional design done by one person. Importantly, we wanted the map to speak transversally across a range of levels. We therefore conceived of it as based around a number of key layers: a subjective one, mainly constituted by the narratives and of course drawings; an institutional one, constituted by an anatomy of the campus; a display of flows, actors and institutions also on the level of the city (London); and a layer speaking to global flows, borders and actors. With the knowledge that there are many experiences that constitute the relations between the university, migration regimes, money flows and policies of austerity, the question was how to make it look readable without resulting in a homogenising, polished, final look. This also speaks to the impossibility of creating a total picture of the complexities of the subject.

We had a lot of discussions about the presentational style and the aesthetics of the map. We wanted it to look both playful and serious. It was soon clear that we wanted to go beyond the machinist look of much 'systemic' countermapping (as in the style of the maps of Bureau d'études for instance, which were a key point of reference) and also giving up on the pretence of scientific authority (no pie charts, not too many standardised icons). Instead, we have little brains playing on the idea of 'brain-drain', sea monsters referring to real baroque navigation charts, as well as to the real monsters of bureaucracy and border control. The idea of a Sea of Bureaucracy was intended as both a real lived experience for many (we used the text of an actual form you have to complete) and of course also a humorous nod to some of the affects of migration and administration. It is hoped that the diverse and fluid design illustrates the point that it is a map of movement and conflict rather than of fixed systems, filters-border mechanisms and set borders. We tried to conceptualise this

into the vague idea of 'techno-baroque'. Techno standing in for the technocratic, bureaucratic, pointing to all of the insane digital and bricks 'n' mortar infrastructures of profiling, differential access, containment, information gathering and legal requirements. Baroque as the excessive and exceeding, monstrously deformed, echoing the irrational paranoidias about the foreigner and the international student that fortress Europe and fortress UK have built and continue to build. In this way, the aesthetic is designed to mock the techno-baroque nature of the current power dispositifs, and to convey the idea that systems of security and control produce their own monsters, imaginary as well as real.

We also tried to situate our systematic critique in some of the subjective positions that run through and are produced by the institutions, flows and apparatuses we mapped. We mapped the salaries, communications and thoughts of staff in the QMary section of the map, and we presented a few speech bubbles with the testimony of various people passing through border agencies. Their presence in the map situates the information and data about VFS Global (the private agency managing Visa application procedures for over 46 countries worldwide, making good business with this) and the UK government.

How might we think about the map as a cultural-political artifact? What kinds of materiality and social practice might it engender? What strategies of dissemination/distribution does it lend itself to (and what avenues was it possible to pursue)?

We all shared a sensitivity to the material aspect of a map as a political tool of communication and organisation, drawing from the experience of the 3C's but also from other experiences in the group with political documents and actions. The idea of a map was from the very beginning born out of a reflection on the limitations of other forms of academic research and dissemination and also on the simplistic and traditionalist approaches of most mainstream activist material on the issues surrounding the -then burgeoning- mobilisations around cuts to funding of higher education in the UK. We wanted to make something people would want to put up on their walls, something that was beautiful and not patronising, something that could travel by itself.

The free distribution and possible uses of the map were built into the design of the whole project. This started with the open public events we co-ordinated in May and continuing throughout all the forms of dissemination and distribution - presentation, game playing - we have done since the countermap was printed. Thanks to the format we have been able to give it away at meetings, conferences and to organise game playing sessions on our campus and elsewhere. We have also been able to use it as teaching material in different departments, in our own and in other universities, as well as using it to discuss the context of alternative educational spaces such as free schools, and to leave in friendly self-organised spaces and radical infoshops and activist spaces.

What has been the reception to this project, as best you can tell. Have there been unexpected or unintended responses? Has it inspired kindred projects/mobilizations?

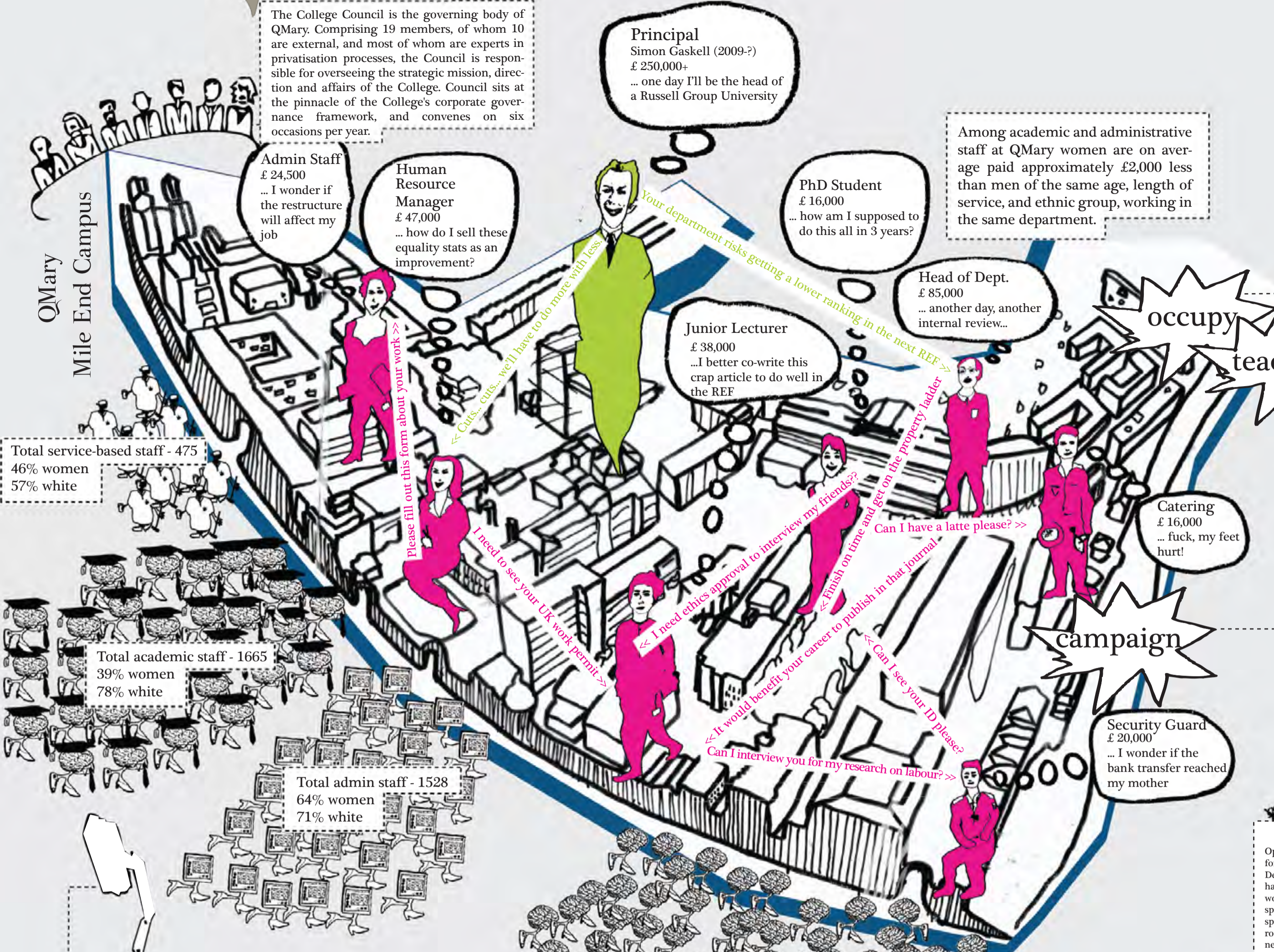
The reception has been good, and quite diverse. Some people like the map, some the game, and people stress different aspects of both. In general people really appreciate the fact that it looks very different from most activist and political material. A staff member at Queen Mary in the International Student Admissions Office asked for copies to help her explain to her British colleagues the issues faced by many international students. A presentation to a group of professors highlighted how little our own lecturers knew about the difficulties faced by their own international students.

The game has worked very well as a tool that forces people to discuss their own and others' experiences of education and border crossings. We specifically designed it as a relational device to get the players to share their experiences and frustrations, and to imagine alternatives. The colourfulness and playfulness of the map has brightened up many a grey bureaucratic political meeting, and inspired others to invent similar tools of mapping, acting and organising in relation to other institutions. We've had requests for people to use our InDesign files for making their own maps (the 'code' of the map is open and free), and given workshops to other groups making their own maps of the university.

Legend

- VFS Global Office
- IRC - Immigration Removal Centre
- Student
- Service Staff
- Admin Staff
- Academic Staff

(VFS icons sized proportionally to the number of UK student visa applicants from that city)



Research Excellence Framework

The REF is a system for measuring 'academic output'. It reduces everything to a system of measure via bibliometrics. The system favours research relevant to industry and business and helps create a market of knowledge and education through their commodification. Co-operation between universities and companies is encouraged. Research funded by taxpayers is turned into privately owned knowledge for companies. Competition amongst universities is promoted whilst the cooperation between independently acting researchers is stifled. The REF is crucial in deciding how much government funding each university receives. It allows government bureaucrats and politicians to discipline universities and university managers to discipline academic staff.

"I applied for a visa to study in the UK while I was studying in Japan - so it was the Tokyo embassy that issued it. And so when I arrived at Heathrow, the UKBA claimed that I was Japanese, not from New Zealand. 'I'm sorry, your papers aren't in order,' - and they sent me back to New Zealand at huge personal cost."

Student from New Zealand

Heathrow Airport

Colnbrooke and Harmondsworth IRCs
Colnbrooke opened in 2004 and is the most secure removal centre within the UKBA estate. It is located close to London Heathrow Airport. Bed spaces: 308 total. Harmondsworth IRC is adjacent to Heathrow Airport and is neighbour to the Colnbrooke immigration removal centre. It is a long-term centre where detainees are detained pending their case resolutions and subsequent deportation from the UK. Bed spaces: 259 single males.

countermapping: finding (y)our way through borders and filters

How did you get here?
We got here by asking how the university functions not only as a knowledge factory but also as a border. This countermap draws some of the connections between the borders, institutions and regulatory systems that operate in and around the university. That the university is a border is made possible by the operation of filter mechanisms. What is a border for some may be a filter for others - the counting of the bodies of student and staff, money in and money out, who can get here and who can't, what we're worth when we leave and the limits of what is and is not knowledge. Who and what is stopped at the border? There is no way of mapping this neutrally: rather we offer a countermap that helps us orient ourselves in, against and beyond the various filter and border regimes.

This map is inspired by all those who resist the border: our experiences of education and our migrations from various locations on and off this map. It was produced by countermapers based in London and North Carolina, with the support of the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary.

For more background about the information on this map, sources for our statistics, and to find out where we're going after this, visit our blog at: countermapping.queens.ac.uk

Dept. for Business, Innovation, and Skills

The Dept. of Business, Innovation and Skills has had many name changes. In 1992 it was the Dept. for Education and Science. In 2001 it changed to the Dept. for Education and Employment. By 2009 it was the Dept. for Innovation, Universities and Skills. In 2010 it was the Dept. for Business, Innovation and Skills. Vince Cable, MP is the State Secretary of State for Dept. Business, Innovation and Skills. He is the former chief economist for the oil company, Shell. Adrian Smith is the Director General of Science and Research. He was the Principal of QMary from 1998 - 2008. Beginning in 1982 he was Operational Analysis Advisor to the Ministry of Defence, the year of the Malvinas War.

On May 5th 2010, the UCU held a rally from King's College to Parliament Square as part of a London-wide education strike.

£850 billion bailout money in 2008-09

benefits cut £15bn and public sector jobs slashed

tax cuts

includes govt funds £64.2m research grants and contracts

HEFCE - £83.4m (2009)

Total student population - 16726
69% home students
31% international

Yarl's Wood IRC
Opened in November 2001. The contract for operating Yarl's Wood was awarded in December 2006 to Serco Ltd. Yarl's Wood has become the main removal centre for women and families. There are 405 bed spaces, divided into 284 single female bed spaces and 121 family bed spaces. All rooms are twin-bedded and interconnected in pairs, so that families can be located together.

On the 4th of May, 2010, Middlesex Philosophy students staged a sit-in in response to plans to close down their department. The sit-in turned into a full blown occupation that lasted for 12 days, hosting lectures, discussions, films and meetings.

750,000 people in London and the South-East are at risk of losing their homes due to the Con-Dems cuts to housing benefits.

Studentification: gentrification caused by a high concentration of uni students, whose higher (debt-fueled) purchasing power triggers inflation of the property prices and rents.

Brook House and Tinsley House Immigration Removal Centres
Opened in March 2005, Brook House is the latest addition to the UKBA removals estate. It is a secure centre, purpose-built to category B prison service standard and is adjacent to the existing facility at Tinsley House near Gatwick Airport. Provides relatively short term accommodation for 426 male detainees.

In March 2010 King's College announced plans to cut 10% of its staff budget. In response staff went on strike and on 30th of March 250 people joined picket lines on all four King's campuses.

In March 2010 a sit-in against the proposed cuts to Sussex University led to the suspension of 6 students and a high court injunction against 'occupational protests'. A week later, 300 students occupied a lecture theatre for eight days while UCU members voted to strike in solidarity. These actions successfully forced management to revoke the suspensions.

27 January to 4 February 2009: Students at QMary occupied lecture theatre 1.13 in the Francis Bancroft Building in solidarity with the people of Gaza. The students demanded that the college divest from arms companies GKN and Cobham, condemn the Israeli bombardments of Gaza and make fully paid scholarships available for Palestinian students.

The living wage movement started in Baltimore in 1994, and the UK campaign was launched in 2001 by London Citizens to end working poverty.

In 2004 the Greater London Authority began calculating an official London hourly rate of pay, which takes into account the higher cost of living in the capital (shelter, diet, social life, dependants) and the rate of inflation. It is currently set at £7.85 (June 2010). QMary became the first Living Wage University in 2007.

Feb 2010: Over 50 women went on hunger strike at Yarl's Wood. They were protesting at poor conditions and the length of time they have been detained - one woman has been held for over two years.

Yarl's Wood IRC

Real Estate Market

Starsted Airport

occupy

QMary

The Banks

Central Government

Private Sector

Con-Dems

strike

occupy

"I was detained for eight hours at Heathrow on my way to a UK conference I had been invited to - then I was sent back to the States for reasons that were unclear. Border agents could not even answer my questions regarding the laws. This has personally cost me thousands, ruined months of plans..."
US based hip-hop artist

occupy
teach-in

campaign

strike

Yarl's Wood IRC

Starsted Airport

occupy

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Con-Dems

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